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Kaiser presses suppliers on 'green hospital' goals

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Kaiser Permanente, which has been on the leading edge of the "green hospital" movement, said Tuesday it will begin pressuring its suppliers to be better stewards of the environment and public health.

As part of a sweeping new environmental initiative, the health care giant will require vendors to disclose environmental data on a host of products – from bandages to hospital beds, from syringes to oxygen monitors – to help promote a healthier environment for patients and workers.

While hospitals aim to heal the sick, they aren't always the most healthy environments themselves – not with toxin-laced IV bags, allergy-causing gloves and other medical supplies that could potentially harm patients and the environment.

"Anything we can do to reduce the environmental contributors to disease," said Kathy Gerwig, Kaiser Permanente's environmental stewardship officer and its vice president for workplace safety.

Nationwide, Kaiser Permanente spends more than \$1 billion annually on medical equipment and supplies at its 35 medical centers and 430 other office buildings. In all, the health care system spends \$14 billion on its annual purchases for medical products and day-to-day supplies such as food and cleaning products.

With billions of dollars in hospital spending at stake, Kaiser officials hope that other hospital systems will follow their lead and flex their purchasing muscles to help "green" the health care industry.

"We are absolutely interested in creating market change through our buying practices," Gerwig said.

In the end, Kaiser officials hope the program will push suppliers to come up with greener products.

Vendors bidding for Kaiser's business must complete a "sustainability scorecard" detailing the chemicals and materials contained in the products. In California, that information would include substances known to cause cancer, birth defects or reproductive harm.

In addition, vendors will need to provide information about product packaging and recycling. Hospitals across the country generate about 4.5 million tons of medical waste each year, some of it potentially dangerous.

And companies will be required to describe their own environmental commitment.

The program could have wide influence across the industry, which has been under pressure by

regulators and environmental groups to clean up its act – from reducing reliance on toxic chemicals to cutting energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions.

"Health care has a huge footprint on the environment," said Beth Eckl, director of the environmental purchasing program for Practice Greenhealth, a network of hospitals and groups advancing the issue.

"It's the second-largest industrial user of energy, behind the commercial food industry. It employs 4.6 million people. It generates lots of waste and uses lots and lots of chemicals."

Kaiser's announcement Tuesday serves as a signal to other hospital systems to treat the environment more responsibly, she said, and also tells hospital suppliers that it's no longer business as usual.

"Kaiser is really leading the way. We support their efforts, and we encourage other health care providers to follow its lead to help move the marketplace," Eckl said.

Already, a green revolution has taken place at many hospitals.

Some hospital systems have adopted green building principles in designing and constructing facilities by using construction materials that are less toxic and require fewer chemicals to maintain.

Instead of fiberglass, one hospital in New Jersey uses shredded blue jeans for wall insulation.

To reduce noxious fumes through its wards, more hospitals have turned to nontoxic cleaning agents to swab floors.

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